

Could the Human Rights Act have an impact on your work?

Shamle Begum introduces Liberty's Voluntary Sector Advice Service.

Have your client's human rights been violated? Does the Human Rights Act apply? What is the right to family life? What is the threshold for degrading treatment?

These are questions that Liberty's advice service dedicated to the voluntary sector can help you with. The Voluntary Sector Advice Service (VAS), funded by Comic Relief, provides free, high quality human rights law advice and information to charities, community groups and other voluntary sector organisations in England and Wales.

Liberty is a leading human rights and civil liberties organisation. Liberty works to promote human rights and protect civil liberties through test case litigation, lobbying, campaigning and the provision of free advice.

Background to the service

Human rights have little meaning in everyday life without an understanding of what they are and how they can be enforced. Liberty's advice service was set up following a revealing survey that highlighted a lack of knowledge amongst voluntary sector organisations on how the Human Rights Act could be used as a tool to positively affect the lives of their clients. The service aims to address this through the provision of written and oral advice on human rights law to organisations and groups that are assisting others.

Liberty also has an online resource called YourRights which provides detailed information on human rights and civil liberties issues and the law. We hope that through working with you, VAS and YourRights can help inform and enforce the human rights of the most vulnerable people.

Scope of the service

There is no such thing as a typical VAS query. Human rights law can be relevant to a whole host of different circumstances. A good indicator of when human rights law may be relevant is when a public authority is involved. Some examples of the queries we have received are below:

- An advocacy organisation asked whether the closure of a care home where residents had lived for over 20 years raised any human rights issues and whether we could offer advice on how the proposed closure could be challenged. Liberty advised that the Article 8 right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence includes a right to be free from interference with peaceful enjoyment of the home and provided advice on the relevant community care law. We also offered practical advice on what to do next. The organisation used the advice to develop a campaign strategy with the residents to oppose the closure.
- A disability organisation asked whether a ban on visitors imposed by the providers of supported accommodation was in breach of

any human rights. Liberty advised that the right to private and family life includes a right to develop relationships with the outside world, and the organisation is using our advice to pressure the accommodation provider into changing their policies.

- A Citizens Advice Bureau adviser contacted us in relation to policies in local schools which involved taking finger prints from the students. We advised them on the human rights issues this raises, and have been told by the adviser that they have circulated this to all other advisers in the area, so they are able to fully inform the parents and students visiting the CABs for information on the legality of these policies.

A valuable tool

The service has received very positive feedback and has been welcomed by those who have contacted us. A community care advocate told us that thanks to the advice service: "my clients are able to access a high level of expertise that is not available from any other source I am aware of. The advice has provided me with the facts that have proved a valuable negotiating tool, enabling my clients to challenge situations where they have been ill-advised in the past".

- If you have a Legal Services Commission contract, please refer to Liberty's specialist support service on **0808 808 4546**.
- Please be aware that we can only advise on matters arising in England and Wales and only on human rights issues, not general legal queries.

Further information

You can access the Voluntary Sector Advice Service by completing an advice request form available online at:

www.yourrights.org.uk/vas

or by phone on **0845 122 8621**

open Monday 14.30-16.30, and Tuesday and Thursday 10.00-12.00.

Liberty's online human rights and civil liberties information website is at **www.yourrights.org.uk**

If you would like to receive the VAS e-newsletter, email **vas@liberty-human-rights.org.uk** with 'Sign Me Up' in the heading and your name and the name of the organisation in the email.